

Destination:

Missouri's Great River Road



Each issue, the *Pathways* staff chooses a notable locale – a place worth visiting – and explores the paths that lead to it, spotlighting attractions, points of interest, oddities and other items of note along the way.

After all, getting there is half the adventure.

By Pam Droog



Champ Clark Bridge, Louisiana

The one constant along Missouri's 407-mile Great River Road is the river itself. The legendary Mississippi flows contentedly beside bluffs and vast bottomlands, past historic river towns, next to railroad tracks and under bridges, making a profound impact on lives and livelihoods.

Our journey up Missouri's Great River Road begins on Route 79 in Pike County at Louisiana, the birthplace of Missouri Gov. Lloyd C. Stark, a major force behind the road (see related story, page 24). Louisiana begins at the river and rises up into the bluffs, where, for some, it ends at a hilltop cemetery with a spectacular view of the Champ Clark Bridge. The distinctly Southern atmosphere includes streets named for Confederate states, lined with an unusually large number of ornate antebellum homes for a town of 4,000.

Turn right off Route 79 and enjoy the scene at the riverfront park. Then head left on Georgia Street to Louisiana's downtown area, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. With its ornate storefronts topped with colorful gingerbread trim, this section of Georgia Street is one of the most intact Victorian streetscapes in Missouri. Browse in the many antique shops, and be sure to stop by the fascinating Louisiana Area Historical Museum.

Back on Route 79 north, a sign advises truckers to take an alternate route to avoid the hilly, curvy two-lane road ahead. But for those in smaller vehicles, the road is a pleasant journey up, down and around, past huge fields of soybeans and corn.

Turn right on Route TT and drive past the tiny town of Ashburn to the Ted Shanks Conservation Area, operated by the Missouri Department of Conservation. This hidden wetland habitat includes 6,705 acres of bottomlands, marshes, oxbow lakes and sloughs. In the spring and fall, a wide array of migratory birds, including egrets and herons by the thousands, plus the rare bald eagle, least bittern and king rail find refuge here. Pick up an auto-tour brochure at the headquarters building and take your time driving around and through this beautiful natural area.





Mark Twain Memorial Lighthouse, Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum, Mark Twain Dinette

The Great River Road continues north on Route 79. You know you're getting close to Hannibal because everything is named after Twain, Tom or Huck. There's simply no escaping the fact that Samuel Langhorne Clemens, aka Mark Twain, lived in Hannibal from 1839 until 1853.

The first Mark Twain attraction one encounters is the Mark Twain Cave, just south of Hannibal. It may be tough to re-live "the same exciting experience as Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher did many years ago" (as the official brochure notes) because the only way to see the cave is by a guided, 55-minute walking tour.

Route 79 goes up over a hill then down into the town of Hannibal. The popular historic district, right next to the river, is wide and bricked and closed to traffic. Here, all within walking distance, are three museums. Between them, you'll learn more than you ever thought possible about Mark Twain's life and times.

The Annex, 415 N. Main, includes one of his famous white suits and a cast of his hand. The Boyhood Home & Museum, 206-8 Hill St., is where young Sam and his family lived for nine years. The snazzy New Museum, Main at Center streets, features manuscripts and memorabilia, and 15 original Norman Rockwell paintings used as illustrations for special editions of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. View the Mississippi from the steamboat pilot-house replica, complete with pilot wheel and a steamboat whistle that works.

At the end of Main Street is the famous Tom and Huck statue, sculpted by Frederick Hibbard in 1926. Above it, on top of a hill, is the Mark Twain Memorial Lighthouse, the largest and most inland lighthouse in the nation. The steps up to it are steep but climbable.

Hannibal has its version of Lover's Leap, based on the classic story of thwarted lovers from warring Indian tribes. In this case, a Pawnee warrior and a Fox maiden preferred to jump together to their deaths rather than live apart. The stone cliff is fenced off to prevent modern lovers or others from jumping. The view of the town and river is excellent from here.

To recover from all the drama, visit the Mark Twain Dinette, home of famous Mark Twain fried chicken and tasty home-brewed root beer. It's located next to the historic district. Just look for the big twirling mug.

Heading out of Hannibal on Route 36 west, you'll encounter MoDOT's new single-point interchange, the only one in Missouri outside Kansas City or St. Louis. It's part of the department's \$5.5 million project to upgrade the busy Route 61/36 intersection by the end of the year.

A mile past the interchange, turn right on Route 168 north. This twisting road travels through woods and farmland to Palmyra, the county seat of Marion County. A plaque at the courthouse states Palmyra in 1860 was considered "the handsomest city in northern Missouri" (it doesn't say by whom).

The Great River Road continues on Route 61 north, a straight, fast four-lane that leads to Wakonda State Park. The 1,053-acre park attracts fishermen and waterfowl. Its natural sand beach, the largest in the state, attracts families and swimmers. Weird concrete bunker-like structures could be sculptures but actually are remnants of a once-thriving gravel business.

But what really sets Wakonda apart is its "Rent-A-RV" program, offered April 15 through Oct. 30. It's a neat way to experience a recreational vehicle "without the high costs of owning and hassles of towing," says a program brochure. Basic and fancy models are available.





Cedar Falls Historic Village, Canton, stained glass window, Shrine of St. Patrick



Mark Twain Casino, LaGrange

From Wakonda take two-lane Route B north toward LaGrange and the Mark Twain Casino. People from miles around waited four hours to get in on opening day, July 25. Outside, the structure resembles an old-time riverboat. Inside, the small but bright and brand-new casino offers blackjack, craps, roulette and slots from a penny up, plus a restaurant (the Clemens Café) and lounge. On an overcast Thursday afternoon, the place was packed.

The town of LaGrange is quiet and tidy, with roots back to 1795. People come here in the winter for eagle-watching. A few miles north on Route B is Canton, another good place to watch eagles as well as some of the 40 million tons of commercial river traffic that annually pass through the Army Corps of Engineers' Lock & Dam No. 20.

Or ride a boat yourself – namely, the Canton Ferry, the longest continuously operating ferry service on the Mississippi (since 1853). Early ferries, powered by two horses walking on treadmills connected to paddlewheels, carried westbound wagon trains and gold miners. Today, the “Paul B” is powered by two diesel engines. A relaxing round trip to Illinois and back takes about 12 minutes and costs \$7 (\$4 one-way).

Back on land, take a trip to the past at the Cedar Falls School and Historic Village and Remember When Toy Museum in Canton. Owner Robert Wyatt is not only headmaster at the school (which has 14 students, K-12), he's chief curator and contractor at the fascinating mid-19th century village, and main collector at the toy museum.

A good example of a hobby that grew, the complex started 12 years ago as a place to house Wyatt's extensive collection of old toys, which now numbers more than 10,000. “The village was an afterthought,” he says.

He turned an old building on the property into a store, and as people began donating building materials and antiques, Wyatt put up a general store, feed store, dry goods store and doctor's office (complete with donated skeleton).

Continuing north on Route 61 about 12 miles, take a quick side trip on Route Z west to St. Patrick, the only town in the world with a post office named for this saint. As expected, the tiny town rocks on March 17.

But you don't have to be there to share the blarney. You can send your letters to St. Patrick to receive a pictorial postmark, or purchase a specially designed envelope the postmaster will mail for you on or around St. Patrick's Day. For details, write: Postmaster, St. Patrick, MO 63466 or visit www.mayo-ireland.ie/patrick.htm.

But any day of the year, the Shrine of St. Patrick is worth a visit, with its magnificent stained-glass windows featuring ancient Celtic symbols. And don't miss the Old Irish Gift Shoppe next door, where owner Nancy Kirchner offers an impressive selection of all things Irish.



Take Route Z back to the Great River Road, Route 61 north, through well-kept farmland and lots of fireworks stands to the Route 136 Spur. Here is Sheffler's Rock Shop and Geode Mines, sacred ground to geode hunters around the world. Sheffler's famed "Keokuk Geodes" are the only gemstone-quality geodes in the U.S.; the mine is the only one of its type in the country registered with the U.S. Bureau of Mines.

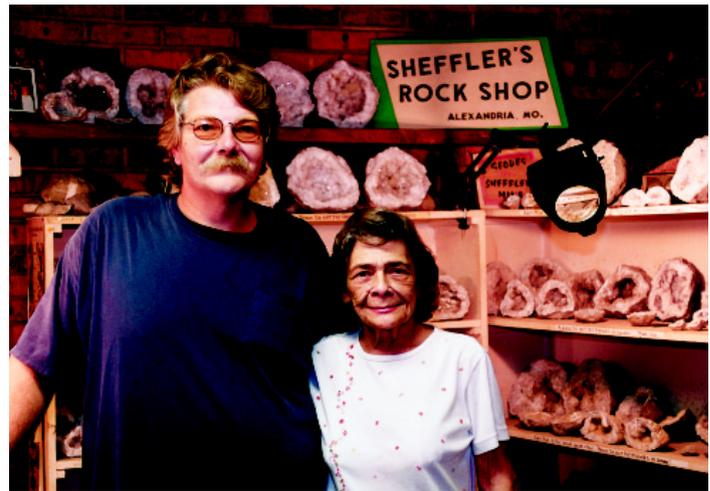
A geode is a round rock containing a cavity that's lined with rock crystals, typically quartz. To the untrained eye, on the outside it looks like a mudball. But real collectors can spot a valuable specimen, one that may contain amethyst, agate, jasper or chalcedony.

Check in at the shop, a showplace built by Betty Sheffler and her husband in 1972 with rocks and minerals from every state and many foreign countries. Betty gladly shares stories about geodes and collectors, like former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, who was a steady customer.

"When you open up a geode, you're the first person ever to see it, you and God," Betty observes. "We hurry through life, so when you stop and open a little gray rock and see its beauty, that's something pretty great."



Betty Sheffler, owner of Sheffler's Rock Shop, and her son, Tim.



Betty's son, Tim, says he's been a rock hound since he was 12. He gets a kick meeting geode miners from around the world. The cost is \$15 to remove 50 lbs. of geodes (roughly a 5-gallon bucket) from one or both Sheffler mines, which Tim will direct you to. There, geodes lie scattered on the ground, or you can mine them from the shale beds with a pickaxe and shovel.

At this point, Missouri's Great River Road follows Route 61, which crosses the Mississippi just past Alexandria. But if you keep going up the Route 136 Spur to Wayland and follow Route 136 west, you'll reach Kahoka, the Clark County seat.



Tim Sheffler at work in the geode mine.

This busy, agricultural town is growing, and new businesses are setting up shop there. The "Missouri Mule Capital," Kahoka hosts the popular Clark County Mule Festival every September. Admission is free. Events include a Mule Parade, Mule Pull and other wacky mule competitions. Next year's festival will be held Sept. 21-22.



From Kahoka, take Route 81 north to Route CC and the Battle of Athens (Athens) State Historic Site, the setting for the northernmost Civil War battle fought west of the Mississippi River. The battle on Aug. 5, 1861, lasted three hours, and 500 Union Home Guardsmen troops defeated 2,000 pro-South Missouri State Guardsmen. There were only 50 casualties on each side. The battle will be re-enacted next August.



Thome-Benning House, Athens

During the battle, a cannonball pierced the 1841 Thome-Benning House, barely missing the occupants. The entry and exit holes are covered with plexiglass. The house is being carefully restored while it serves as headquarters for the beautiful 400-acre park, which once was a thriving village of 800 residents.

Other restored buildings still line the town's old lanes. It's a serene place to stroll while you reflect on the history and beauty of Missouri's Great River Road.

Until next time, may your destinations be exciting and the journeys to them eye-opening. ■

The Mississippi River Parkway Commission *of Missouri*



The Great River Road is a 3,000-mile system of parkways and highways along both sides of the Mississippi River from Canada to New Orleans. More than 400 of those miles are in Missouri.

Missouri became the birthplace of the Great River Road in 1936, when Gov. Lloyd C. Stark asked the Missouri State Planning Board to consider a parkway along the Mississippi. The concept led to the formation of the National Mississippi River Parkway Commission in 1938. The commission includes nine other states along the river plus two Canadian provinces.

The commission, based in Minneapolis, preserves, promotes and enhances the scenic, historic and recreational resources of the river. It also fosters economic growth along the corridor, and develops and promotes the Great River Road National Scenic Byway.

Each of the 10 member states also has its own commission; the Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Missouri is housed in Jefferson City at MoDOT headquarters, the umbrella agency for the organization. The commission includes two state senators and two representatives, plus five public members appointed by the governor. The Missouri departments of Conservation, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Economic Development assist the commission's efforts.

"Recreational travel has always been very popular, and the Great River Road is an excellent recreational drive," says Mark Kross, assistant to the director of project development at MoDOT and commission secretary. "Lately,

more and more Missourians are discovering or rediscovering the Great River Road."

The Missouri group's accomplishments recently earned the national commission's Annual Pilot's Award. The state group was cited, for the second time, for outstanding achievement in pursuing the commission's goals and objectives. Kross received the commission's Distinguished Service Award for his work on behalf of the Great River Road on the state and national levels.

Among its recent major achievements, in early 2001 about 190 Missouri Great River Road signs were installed from Hannibal to Iowa and from Perryville to Arkansas. As a result, the Great River Road is now marked continuously all along the Mississippi River in Missouri.

The MoMRPC recently published a Missouri Great River Road guide, detailing highlights along the route. The group also is working on a bird-watching route and map of prominent birding sites, as well as interpretive signs noting the geology, history, culture and other aspects of Missouri's fascinating Great River Road.

For more information, contact Mark Kross at (573) 751-4606, or:

The Mississippi River Parkway Commission
P.O. Box 59159
Minneapolis, MN 55459
(763) 212-2560
www.mississippiriverinfo.com.